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CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS  
AUTHORITY.

CRITICISM OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AS  
EXPRESSED IN THREE VICTORIAN NOVELS.

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## ABSTRACT

The opening chapter of this thesis describes the Church of England as it existed in the first half of the nineteenth-century. The close liason between the Established Church and the State is emphasised as is the involvement of the Church in many areas of Victorian life. Because, to a large extent, the Church is the Clergy the lives of many clerical representatives of the Church are discussed - and are found, on the whole, to be lacking in dedication. The three novels continue the method of examining the Church through depiction of its clergymen. Each novel presents a different challenge to the Established Church. *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë, is critical of the Church because it misuses its Authority in its subjugation of women and finds false justification for this in scripture. Elizabeth Gaskell, in a covert way critices the Church by comparing it unfavourably with Unitarianism. George Eliot, in *Middlemarch* is deeply sceptical of the supernatural grounds for the Authority of the Church. She finds Authority in religious humanism. At the time the Church considered that its many problems were found either within itself due to its polarisation into Low and High Church, or else from without as the Dissenters and Roman Catholics increased in numbers. These three novels, however, consider problems which, although hardly of concern at the time, have since become major issues for the Church and its Authority.

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## CHAPTER 1

In the late eighteenth century the relationship between Church and State was, on the whole, the same as it had been when the Established Church came into being under King Henry VIII. Peter Virgin comments on this situation. "The church, according to classic eighteenth - century theory, was a pillar of the constitution; and as such it was part and parcel of the system of law, as well as being the partner - some said the ally - of the state" (p. 15).

Virgin continues by describing the church as being under the protection of the great and powerful and maintained in its social place by a complex legal apparatus, which extended into financial, sacramental and educational areas. Every householder in England, irrespective of his religious affiliation, had to pay the church rate for the upkeep of the parish; baptism and marriage, if desired by any member of the population, had to be in Anglican churches, burial in the parish churchyard only by Anglican clergy using an Anglican order of service. The church had exclusive educational rights in that Roman Catholics and Dissenters were excluded from degrees at Cambridge and even from matriculating at Oxford (pp.15 - 16). These customs caused considerable resentment against the Established Church - a resentment which grew as the number of Dissenters increased. This reached explosive levels in the early 1830's.

Parliament wielded wide-reaching authority in the affairs of the church. Such matters as Orders of Service, the creation of new bishoprics, the laws governing pluralism, the number of cathedral posts and matters of church discipline were all the concern of Parliament. This did not mean that the church was the servant of the State. The eighteenth-century view was that there was interdependence, an "alliance" between the two. In the 1790's, however, the State was represented by the upper classes and, fearful of an English form of the French Revolution, they needed the church as a moral bastion, a force for social control. Paradoxically social control was achieved to a considerable degree not through the Established Church but through the Methodist revival. According to Elie Halevy "we shall explain by this movement (Methodism) the extraordinary stability which English

society was destined to enjoy throughout a period of revolution and crisis" (p. 387).

The success of the Methodist Church under Wesley and Whitefield raises the question as to why the Established Church failed to bring religion to the people and was "upstaged" by Dissent. The Evangelical movement, of course, was to some extent an exception, as showing an impulse towards reform within the Church of England, and we shall consider it presently.

There were many deficiencies in the late eighteenth - century and the early nineteenth-century church. Charges of pervasive slackness and abuses were levelled. Gerald Parsons has suggested that these were due not to pervasive failure but failure to reform energetically. Parsons describes the Church then as being "an essentially practical, rational, moderate church, with a low regard for mystery and emotion, a dislike of extremes, and an avoidance of organized churchmanship" (p. 19). E. E. Kellett has a similar opinion, suggesting that there was in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century a legacy from the eighteenth and that "such Christianity was hardly to be distinguished from a reasonable respectability" (p.25).

Such a church was in no condition to be an effective opposition to Dissent. Although Wesley remained an Anglican himself many Methodists, rejected by the Established Church, formed their new church and in so doing influenced other Dissenting denominations. They too gained in strength. The result was a loss to the Anglican church.

A further weakness in the Church of England was caused by the doubling of the population in England in the fifty years from 1800. There was an associated movement of people from rural areas to the new industrial towns. Both the State and the Church failed to adjust to these changes. Gerald Parsons comments that,

The Church of England of 1832 paralleled the unreformed Parliament in the mismatch between the geographical location of its human, financial and physical resources, and the growing centres of population in early nineteenth-century Britain. The diocesan and parochial systems had remained virtually unchanged for over 500 years. (p. 18).

Bradford, for example, expanded from 6393 in 1800 to 34,560 in 1841 but was still a single parish.

Just as Parliamentary reform included the need for greater representation so did the internal government of the church. At the time of the first Parliamentary Reform Bill in 1832 the Convocation of Canterbury and York had not met since 1717.

The lethargic state of the church was reflected in its buildings. Churches and parsonages had become dilapidated and neglected. Hart and Carpenter describe a typical situation.

The altar, wrote Dean Hole of the church of his childhood, was represented by a small rickety deal table, with a scanty covering and faded and patched green baize, on which were placed the overcoat, hat and riding whip of the officiating minister. . . . The font was filled with coffin ropes, tinder boxes and brimstone matches, candle ends, etc. It was never used for baptism. Sparrows twittered and bats floated beneath the rotten timbers (p. 4).

Not only were buildings in this lamentable state but there was a grave shortage of churches in the towns and in the new manufacturing centres. There were, for example, 1,220,000 people in the diocese of London with church-room for only 336,500. St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green could accommodate only 4% of the population.

The wealth or poverty of a diocese bore no relation to its size and population. There were incredible inequalities. The classic case was Chester, where one of the largest yet poorest districts included within its boundaries Liverpool and Manchester. At the diocesan level Episcopal incomes varied considerably. The ten wealthiest sees had an average annual income of £11,634 and the wealthiest of all an income of £22,305; but the average income of the remaining sixteen sees was less than £3000. They varied no less strikingly at the parochial level: whilst the richest of livings was worth over £1000 a year there were, in the 1830's, over 3,500 livings worth less than £150. Curates received even less. The consequences of such anomalies for the quality of pastoral care ranged from the disturbing to the appalling" (Parsons 18 - 19).



Every benefice in the Church of England had a patron. Some benefices were the gift of the Crown, others those of church dignitaries, colleges and public institutions, trustees, London companies and guilds and an enormous range of private citizens. Alan Haig's research concludes that in the period 1821 to 1901 the number of benefices grew by some 3500 to over 14000. Throughout, benefices in the gifts of private individuals or of trusts made up between 48 and 53 percent of the whole (p. 249). The private benefices were predominantly in rural areas. Private livings were usually obtained by purchase or given away from interested motives - that is, given to a son or relative.

The financial position of incumbents varied considerably. Francis Knight quotes the case, in 1848, of two Lincolnshire incumbents who were so destitute that they could have died of starvation. Knight suggests that these cases, although extreme, were perhaps not isolated examples. Incumbents in poverty, particularly the elderly and frail, were often supported without fuss or publicity by neighbouring clergy (p. 130). 16% of the total English benefices were valued at £100 and under. By contrast 4% of the total were worth between £1000 and £2000. An average of 54% of the total were in the low-income range of values of £300 or less. This was the situation in 1830. Haig suggests that £300 marked the boundary between keeping up a respectable middle class appearance and having to struggle (p. 304). Bishop Kay considered that £200 was the absolute minimum.

Knight points out that the clergy were expected also to relieve the poor and to pay any curate if one was employed. For an incumbent with a family and no private income a stipend of £500 was hardly sufficient (p. 132). Haig considers that "What kept the clergy - and hence the parochial system as a whole afloat - financially, was the amount of their private means. The fact was generally acknowledged in the mid-century years" (p. 307).

Absenteeism and pluralism were other legacies of the pre-reform church. In 1827, of 10,544 benefices the incumbents of only 4413 were resident. Most of them, holding more than one living, resided in one of the benefices and hardly ever saw their other one or two livings which were served by curates. A few absentee clergymen, like Trollope's Dr. Stanhope, lived overseas. The lot of a pluralist was not, however, always easy. In 1857 D. S. Wayland held three livings

but after paying his curates a total of £225 had very little remaining and described himself as a poor man.

As part of the general reforms in the church the Pluralities Acts of 1838 and 1850 placed a gradual reduction on the holdings of plural livings. As more incumbents started to reside in their livings the number of sole-charge curacies was reduced and curates became assistants to the incumbents. But such reforms were still in the future, so far as our novels are concerned.

The lot of curates was unenviable. Because incumbencies could not be held before ordination as a priest there was some period, always at least a year, as a curate. In the mid-century this became a serious problem as the necessary period between ordination and incumbency was increasing and some clergy seemed to have less chance of obtaining a living within say fifteen years. Many waited much longer. For a large majority curacies were the sole employment before their first benefice. A less important role lay in the area of chaplaincies. Most men who pursued this option did so for only a short period between curacies and livings. Full-time chaplains seem to have numbered no more than three to four hundred. Most were paid comparably to curates, some as low as £65 p.a. and as high as £250. The posts seem to have been either restful berths for men who had no need for concern at their small incomes, or modest jobs akin to curacies but with a certain degree of stability, taken by men of few means or connections. The latter fact seems confirmed by the predominance of non-Oxbridge men among those who held chaplaincies for significant periods (Haig p. 217).

As noted above, the term "curate" had changed its meaning from a sole-charge position to that of being an assistant to a resident incumbent. Efforts were made through such agencies as the Curates Augmentation Fund to raise the stipend but little was achieved. On the whole the lot of the curates was lamentable. There was a tendency for an incumbent to hand over all the work to the curates who toiled mightily with little financial recompense.

While much emphasis is directed at the financial plight of both incumbents and curates who lacked private means there was also a stratum of "gentlemen clergy" who had no financial problems. This

group seems to have enjoyed sport and numerous other pursuits. Hart and Carpenter consider that,

possibly the eighteenth-century saw more parsons indulging in the pastimes of hunting, shooting, drinking, cock fighting, dicing and card playing than at any other time before or since. Many scandals were caused, but few clergymen were indicted (p. xxvi).

A good example, quoted by Hart and Carpenter, is James Woodeforde who was a gentleman and a scholar with an income of £400 per year.

The famous diary he kept is mainly concerned with six matters: detailed descriptions of the large meals he ate; his visits to neighbouring gentry and clergy, where besides the food consumed the chief occupation was card-playing, or sometimes in the summer bowling, for money; frequent expeditions to Norwich; long holidays with relations in the West country; personal affairs; and Church duties; in that order of importance (p. xxvii).

Woodeforde was at home with the gentry and his bishop, but was also described as being the Good Samaritan.

Hart and Carpenter refer also to the nineteenth-century Squarson: the Black Squire of the countryside "who was of good birth, possessed ample private means beyond what his rich benefice brought him and ruled his parish like a benevolent autocrat" (p.xxix).

Another term for such clergymen is "High and Dry." Robert Lee Wolff, writing about the early 1830's comments that while the church needed reform in such areas as nepotism, absenteeism and neglect of parish duties,

many of the clergy remained unmoved, "high and dry", living the lives of country gentlemen and comfortably indifferent to the needs of their poorer parishioners, administering communion four times a year (though gingerly moving in some advanced regions towards monthly celebrations), clinging to psalms rather than adopting the hymns of Evangelical worship, allowing the fabric of many village churches to decay, and acting like minor

officials of the state - which, in a way they were - rather than spiritual leaders (p. 19).

R. W. Church writes of them:

Its better members were highly cultivated, benevolent men whose lives were governed by an unostentatious but solid and unfaltering piety, ready to burst forth on occasion into fervid devotion. Its worse members were jobbers and hunters after preferment, pluralists who built fortunes and endowed families out of the Church, or country gentlemen in orders, who rode to hounds and shot and danced and farmed and often did worse things (pp. 14-15).

Many of these clergymen conformed in most respects to the traditional stereotype of the huntin' and fishin' school. Hart reports the Bishop of Exeter, Phillpotts, saying to one of his clergy that he didn't complain that he hunted but that he didn't do anything else (p. 25). Hart's research has also found a remarkable little book entitled *Wilke's Essays on the Signs of Conversion or Non-Conversion of Ministers of the Church of England*, one sentence of which ran as follows:

The conscientious clergyman will neither devote his morning to the chase nor his evenings to the card table; he will not be the steward of the racecourse, nor the litigious guardian of the Game Laws; he will not be the frivolous companion of female amusement nor the boisterous associate of Bacchanalian carousal (p. 47).

Hart states that as late as the eighteen-thirties ordinands for the Salisbury diocese were required to read it.

It is obvious that the clergyman who acts in the reprehensible manner described in Wilke's essay has insufficient regard for the Authority of the Church. Hart provides several examples of this. The rector of Perivale, near Ealing, then a little village, would have his butler stand at the church door of a Sunday morning to ask those who came whether they would prefer Mattins in church or a glass of ale at the rectory. Another, the Rev. John Bythesea, a rector of Bagendon in Gloucestershire from 1800 - 1845, was averse to taking too many

services; "for he sent his Clerk to the church of a Sunday afternoon with a bag of sixpences, and instructions to turn away any would-be worshippers. This practice, apparently was not uncommon in Lincolnshire as well as Gloucestershire" (Hart p.46). Some incumbents were even worse and Hart relates accounts of smuggling clergymen who hid the brandy casks in the church. In Devon and Cornwall a ship aground on the rocks was regarded as a gift from God and both parson and people were more concerned with salvaging its stores than saving the lives of its crew and passengers (Hart pp. 55-6).

Although the church reformed itself in the last sixty years of the nineteenth century the "reformed" parson remained a country gentleman. The younger sons of upper class, moneyed, families were happy to become parsons and establish themselves in pleasant rural parsonages. As the century moved on, however, there was, in keeping with the Victorian ethic, a greater seriousness and far more dedication to the needs of the parish.

The changed attitude was reflected also in the courts of law. At the beginning of the century many clergymen were magistrates. From the 1850's onwards the number of clerical magistrates slowly declined with the realization that the two roles were fundamentally incompatible from a Christian point of view.

When considering the nineteenth-century clergyman the question arises as to what extent the ministry was a profession or a calling. There seems little doubt that until 1832 it was mainly regarded as one profession among the others - medicine, law and the armed forces. There was not always a spiritual reason or motivation to become a clergyman. Haig quotes *The Parent's handbook*, by J. C. Hudson, which appeared in 1842. The first chapter was on the Church and motivation or dedication never mentioned; all was to do with money.

There should be no difficulty whatever in purchasing through the medium of any of the clerical agents the next presentation of a living, and one of £300 with an incumbent aged over 60 years might be had for less than £1000. (p. 9).

A further reason for taking orders was social, in that a wealthy man who had prospered in "trade" and was not considered a gentleman, by sending his son to Oxbridge and purchasing a good living, would ensure

that his son could be elevated to the gentry. In 1827 ninety-one per cent of graduates from Oxbridge became ordinands. One wonders whether this was because more men wished to become clergymen, or whether an improving general economy allowed more to attend university, who then found no opening other than the Church.

Whether lack of occupational opportunity was the reason for taking orders, or not, it is noteworthy that many clergymen continued to pursue knowledge in a variety of different disciplines. Peter Virgin describes the clergy's contribution to learning across a wide range of subjects as being formidable.

Butler and Berkeley in philosophy; Sterne in literature; Malthus and Whateley in political economy; Crabbe in poetry; Stephen Hales in chemistry; William Buckland in geology and mineralogy; Thoman Arnold in ancient history; Gilbert White in natural history and Burn in law. These were among the most original and gifted, but there was also plenty of talent lower down the intellectual ladder; after all, one in six of the parish clergy had been at some time a don (p. 256).

Despite the emphasis on University education for clergymen, it is paradoxical that specific training for them in their future roles was non-existent at the universities before the 1830's. Halevy comments that,

England was probably the sole country in Christendom where no proof of theological knowledge was exacted before ordination. At Oxford theology was reduced to one single question asked of all candidates for examination. At Cambridge no theology whatsoever entered into any of the examinations for a degree (p. 391).

Haig refers to the "simple inflexibility of the universities at the crucial time, 1840 to 1860: while the Church was maintaining a rapid growth of clergy, the universities, static or only growing slowly in number, perforce provided a lesser proportion of the new clergy" (p. 117). It was the development of other training institutions, which helped to make up the shortfall. Such colleges as St. Bees and St. Aidans and King's College in London became available to train non-graduate clergy. From the 1860's, about one-quarter of ordained ministers had been trained in these institutions.



The Church, in the early nineteenth century, would seem to have discounted these non-university institutions. Haig suggests "their existence was regarded as cause for shame or regret rather than for pride. The Church's "official" reaction, when it came, was reluctant and inept" (p. 116).

The reason for this attitude was undoubtedly social. Halevy, commenting on the situation in 1815, wrote

Above all things clergymen must be gentlemen; and to secure this it was of the first importance that they should receive the education, which all English gentlemen received. The Anglican clergy was, and was anxious to remain, a branch of the aristocracy (p. 393).

To emphasize this point Halevy proceeds to record that the choice of archbishops and bishops was political and as the Tories had enjoyed almost uninterrupted power, these men were all Tories as well as being of noble birth. The appointment of the lower clergy was in the hands of the bishops, who were careful to distribute their patronages among their clients and relatives (pp. 393-4). Halevy concludes "Thus did the ecclesiastical constitution of the country harmonize with the political. The landed gentry were masters equally of the ecclesiastical as of the civil administration (p. 394). Halevy's comments apply to England in 1815 when the Church was truly established and in great need of reform. Reform of the Church did occur after 1830 and one of the reasons for this was the growth of the Evangelical movement within the Church itself.

The faith of the Evangelicals is not a particularly intellectual one. It is necessary for man to experience God through "conversion". He must listen to God's word: he must spread that word to others. Because God speaks through the conscience this means following the "inner light". Evangelicals may be Calvinists, meaning that they are predestined to either salvation or damnation, there is nothing they can do themselves to earn or to merit justifying faith. Other Evangelicals may embrace a gentler doctrine, that of Arminianism, which accepts the possibility of universal salvation. All Evangelicals believe that salvation is obtained through faith and the atonement and that

Authority is to be found in the Bible which is inerrant. Evangelicals are known as Low Church.

Although involved in the reform of the Church, its Evangelical wing had existed as a small minority at the end of the eighteenth century. From very small beginnings under Wilberforce and the Clapham sect, it went on in the years after 1785 to become a huge organization achieving great social reforms. Despite its deep dissatisfaction with the ecclesiastical status quo it remained within the established church. Among its many achievements were the abolition of slavery and the formation of the Church Missionary Society.

Evangelicalism was a reaction to eighteenth-century Latitudinarianism. This school was represented by the Cambridge Platonists who disregarded authority and tradition in matters of faith and asserted the supremacy of reason. Influenced by Platonic thought they attempted to wed philosophy and religion with the aim of constructing a philosophical Christianity on the basis of reason. Latitudinarians reasoned that the questioning mind should not be disregarded when considering matters of faith, but that the two aspects should blend together to provide a more acceptable religion. Hart comments,

Such men had been brought up on Archbishop Tillotson's sermons and Locke's *Reasonableness of Religion* and were of the latitudinarian school of thought, deprecating the marvellous and miraculous in religion, laying stress on reason, morality and practical Christianity, and championing the alliance between science and theology. . . . They were kind gentlemanly clerics who abhorred anything in the nature of "enthusiasm" and so vigorously opposed John Wesley and all his works (pp. xxvi - xxvii).

The rise of Evangelicalism, with its rejection of reason, caused the influence of Latitudinarianism to diminish considerably. Nevertheless we are able to discern Latitudinarian ideas expressed by some of the characters in the novels we are about to consider.

After 1830, as we have seen, the Church did commence to reform itself. The strengths of the non-conformist churches, in both numbers and in dedication, meant, according to Peter Virgin, that,



The virtual hegemony enjoyed by the Anglican establishment over many areas of eighteenth-century English life was now almost a thing of the past, a distant memory, and a more religiously varied, but also fragmented society was emerging. Of the reality of this kind of society there came gradually, to be little room for doubt, and its existence was tacitly admitted when in 1828, Parliament repeated the Test and Corporation Acts (pp. 18-19).

These measures enabled Dissenters to sit in Parliament as of right. Within a year similar rights were extended to Roman Catholics. The government came to realise that it was impossible to have political equality when large numbers of the populace were excluded politically through religious affiliations.

Disestablishment - for that is what it amounted to - was followed by Church growth in both quality and numbers. The Victorian bishops worked harder and more closely with their clergy. Chadwick considers it beyond doubt that the clergy of 1860 were more zealous than the clergy of 1830 in all areas of parish life (p. 127).

This thirty-year period, however, was not without discord between the Evangelical and the traditional High Church wings of Anglicanism.

Occupying the opposite pole to the evangelicals was the High Church, the "highest" of which was the Oxford Movement under Newman, Keble, Pusey and others. This represented the Catholic faction and was deeply critical of any interference by the State in Church affairs. The Oxford Movement wished to return the Church to its early pre-Reformation origins as expressed by the Fathers of the Church. As such it tended to introduce various Catholic practices such as confession and it placed greater emphasis on the sacraments. Because of the number of tracts which the leaders of the Oxford Movement wrote and distributed its followers were also known as Tractarians. These High Church Anglicans found their authority in the apostolicity of the Church itself.

The novels considered in the following chapters are concerned with Low and High Church clergymen and with the beliefs and doctrines which they hold. Each novel, however, concentrates on a particular problem - one which, at the time, was not considered to be a threat to the

Established Church - but which has subsequently grown until today it is a major issue for Anglicanism.